1999

Virtues

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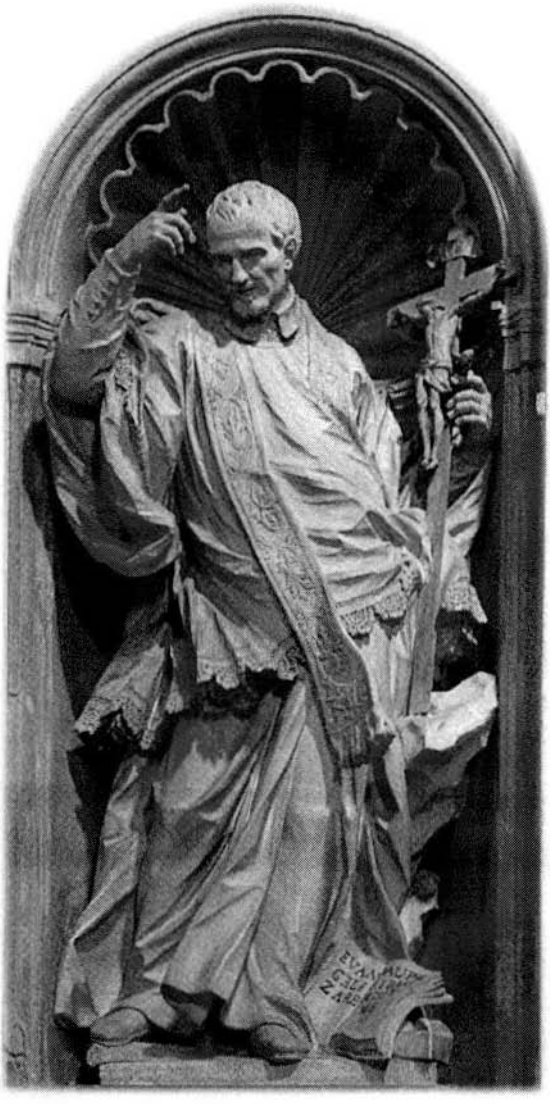

Vincent and the Cowardly Spirit

Vincent's energy and apostolic zeal occasionally brushed up against the resistance of some confreres, whom he called "cowardly and unsettled spirits...capable only of discouraging others," and who balked at the Company's responses to new "opportunities of serving God" in the mission. These adversaries seemed ready to write off not only the present but the future as well.

"What good are so many employments," Vincent has them say, "so many missions, seminaries, conferences, retreats, assemblies, and journeys for the poor? When Monsieur Vincent is dead, all these will soon be abandoned, for what means will there be of keeping up all these undertakings?"

Vincent's reply to that line of thinking was to assert that, if the Congregation "at its birth and in its cradle" has had the courage to embrace these opportunities of serving God, is there not reason to hope "that [the Company] will grow stronger and increase with time."

The Congregation at that moment (in the late 1650s) Vincent felt, still had "the first graces of our vocation flowing upon us...." To act in cowardice, he was convinced, was to "render ourselves unworthy of the many blessings that God has, up to the present, poured down upon the Company, and of the many holy employments which his providence has confided to it."

When providence spoke, Vincent was determined to act, even in the face of risk. "Let us not be discouraged," he said elsewhere in similar circumstances, "either by dangers or by the apparent fruitlessness of our zeal...Do merchants refrain from going to sea because of the dangers...or [speaking from his different cultural sensibility] soldiers from going to war because of the wounds and death to which they are exposed?"

In this spirit Vincent encourages his missionaries to "give ourselves to God, Gentlemen, so that he may grant us the grace to stand fast...He will be faithful to his promises; he will never abandon us as long as we remain fully obedient to him

for the fulfillment of his designs." The saint reassures them in their fears against over extension: "I do not say that it is necessary to proceed to infinity and to undertake all things without distinction, but those things which God lets us see he asks of us. We are his and not our own; if he increases our work, he will also increase our strength."

In fact, it was well known that Vincent never deliberately sought a foundation. His belief was that "if we are good, we shall never lack foundations, and if we are not good, then we already have too many."

November, 1990

Vernacular Spirituality

That is a nice phrase that Vincent would like. It is not his, but he would certainly understand the notion and feel kinship with it, for it makes a good fit for his incarnational approach to holiness. "Vernacular" suggests a level of the ordinary: of understanding and achievement that are within reach of everyone. "Vernacular spirituality," regardless of whose term it is, would point to finding the sacred in the ordinary, and God in everyday life. It is broader than Christian and suggests that the path of anyone's search for the transcendent will lead through the mundane.

That Vincent was an adherent of this informal path to holiness is commonplace of his life story. One of his signature utterances is the observation that "perfection does not consist in ecstasies but in doing the will of God." That is, holiness does not need extraordinary signs to be authentic. Instead of flashy displays, the more convincing sign is the day-to-day, unspectacular fidelity to duty. "God attends to the affairs of our soul," said Vincent, "while we are attending to those of our vocation." This does not preclude intensity of love that drives the action, for, he urged, love of God should be exercised in "the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow."

Accordingly, the "size" of the act means little in determining value. In fact, it is better, says the saint, to be attentive "to the smallest circumstances, in order that nothing may be wanting in what we do." There is "safety," too, in that smallness, for it tends to hold pride at bay. "Little actions done to please God are not subject to vanity as other actions that are more brilliant, which often go up in smoke." Economy, too, is a factor that makes for quality: "Do not overburden yourself with rules and practices, but strengthen yourself to fulfill well those you have, especially as regards your daily actions and employments...."

Perhaps the best window into Vincent's mind on this subject is what we might call the principle of priority. The religious-apostolic life is not so neat as to ensure that everything will always stay in its place or follow in its proper order. Thus, there were often seeming conflicts — more so, tensions — between devotions and apostolic duties, as when the immediate demands of the poor, the sick, or other needs of the apostolate

clashed with times for prayer, mass, or other "at home" activities. This tension more often faced the Daughters of Charity, who had urgent calls from the poor. As Vincent instructed them, "We should accommodate ourselves according to the demands of our vocation. At times certain things are to be dispatched which cannot be put off and which are not compatible with the hour of prayer." The sensible solution, says the saint, is "to advance or postpone the customary hours." Actually, "the duty of charity is above every rule." In a way, both obligations revealed the face of God, and therefore are of equal importance. For this supposed dilemma, Vincent coined the expression that the person who chose the more urgent action was "leaving God for God."

If the path to holiness for Vincent was a way of simplicity, he was equally convinced that the language to clothe the gospel message should be simple. In this regard he indeed spoke and advocated "vernacular." If holiness was to be within the reach of the ordinary person — under the action of grace, of course — the directions for achievement should be intelligible on that level.

This drive for simplicity led Vincent into his work to reform the preaching of his day. His contemporaries recognized his difference in style. One of them, in a book dedication to the saint that contrasted his mode with the inflated style of many churchmen, complimented him on his preference of "plebeian knowledge rather than of noble ignorance." Vincent indeed crusaded against pride in the pulpit, that is, "preaching oneself and not Jesus Christ." He claimed that "to play the peacock by making beautiful discourses is to commit a sacrilege." Preaching that was "over decorated," and punctuated with "bombastic language and style" and "ornamental speech," distressed him. In the end, the "Little Method" of simplicity, order, and directness in preaching that he developed was such a success both within the Congregation and among the other clergy that the ultimate compliment for a cleric was to say that "He preaches like a missionary!"

When occasions warranted, Vincent could be oblique: he could write a florid, convoluted letter to a bishop that equaled the style of any contemporary; or his Gascon temperament was capable of political craftiness for getting things done. But his basic sensibility leaned toward the simple and the direct. For his approach to spirituality this disposition served him well in making holiness intelligible and in demonstrating how, under grace, it is within the reach of everyone. The route that the saint pointed out was incarnational: that is, it is grounded in God's immediacy and presence in the world and in daily experience. The notions entailed are neither unique nor original with Vincent, nor did he expound them in any single mode as in a treatise. Rather, they are a network of threads scattered through all his utterances. Like the road lines of a map they are multi-colored and stretch in all directions. Unlike the map's configurations, these lines are capable of leading to God whatever direction you take.

November, 1993

Meekness, the Charming Virtue

Vincent took a lifelong interest in promoting the virtue of meekness. His conviction about its worth undoubtedly grew out of his own personal struggle to master it, even to the point of praying to God to change his "austere and disagreeable disposition" into a "meek and benign spirit." He found encouragement in the example of his friend and mentor, Francis de Sales, a man of "gentleness and exquisite meekness of character," who was to Vincent a mirror of the face of God. In testifying later to Francis' sanctity, Vincent exclaimed, "Oh! how good God must be, since the bishop of Geneva is so good."

Vincent recognized meekness as an effective behavior for ministry. It was one way, for instance, to moderate the violent passions that accompanied the religious and theological disputes of the day. In this arena, Francis de Sales was again the model: the controversialist, in Vincent's mind, who converted heretics "rather by his graciousness than by his doctrine." Of another disputant, Vincent said that this man was "able to convince heretics, but that it appertained only to the bishop of Geneva to convert them."

Vincent himself had "never seen or known of a heretic who was converted by skillful dialectics...but [of] many converted by kindness...."

This stance was likewise a useful norm for promoting good day-to-day relations, both within the apostolate and at home in community. The meek and the gracious people are the steady and reliable ones, Vincent felt, unlike those driven by irascibility, "who only act by fits and starts; ...they are like torrents, strong and impetuous only when in full flood, but which dry up afterwards." The gentle and gracious ones, on the other hand, are the rivers that flow on "noiselessly, tranquilly, and unfailingly." In another image, such personalities born out of barren soil bear only thistles. For effective ministry, Vincent believed, "a certain charm and pleasing exterior are necessary in order not to repel anyone."

Daily experience confirmed these insights. Indeed, Jesus himself had to

exercise enormous meekness and restraint in managing successfully the impetuosities and the rivalries among his apostles. Closer to home, Vincent directed superiors to act in the same spirit toward those in their care. The resistant confrere is to be drawn forward "as mildly as possible." This is not to rule out firmness in the exercise of authority. Firmness in pursuit of the end is necessary, Vincent repeatedly insisted, but the means to be used are always to be "apt, gracious, and attractive." Likewise, the missionaries are advised to act meekly and humbly toward the poor, for "otherwise they [the poor] will be disheartened and will not dare to approach us, looking upon us as lords, too stern and too great for them."

"The heart of another is opened by gentleness and affability," might be an axiom by which the saint lived. "If a man is not won by meekness and patience, it will be difficult to win him by other means." The power of the virtue derives from a source beyond the human. Indeed, Vincent claims, "it is proper to the Spirit of God, and therefore, to imitate [the Spirit] in this manner of acting is the most assured means of obtaining success."

February, 1990

Charity is a Verb

"Charitable action is the true characteristic of the love of God," Vincent declared. The love expressed in charity mirrors on earth the "pure act" of the Godhead, who, in addition to the loving action of the divine nature within itself, is externally engaged in creation and conservation, sanctification and salvation.

In other words, true charity, in the love both of God and of the neighbor, is authenticated by visible action. It makes a person, says the saint, "solidly virtuous, and not merely so in imagination...It excels knowledge, ecstasy and study. Prayer and study should resolve themselves into action. The light in the mind should become a fire in the heart and on the lips of the apostle." In the end, "the hand should conform to the heart."

Thus, the perfection of charity lies in its fruitfulness, Vincent claimed, as it passes from words into deeds. If we had "but a spark of the love [that Jesus modeled] could we remain with our arms folded and neglect those whom we might assist?" Moreover, not only does charity have its visible effects, it also "begets love in the hearts of those toward whom it is exercised."

Charity, however, is not a "soft" virtue, but it is exercised at a price. God does not only say, Vincent notes, "Thou shalt use the industry of the mind to gain your living," but also, "Thou shalt labor with thy hands, with thy arms, with thy whole body, and with such activity and fatigue that sweat shall fall from thy brow." For this reason, there is no room for "discouragement or cowardice" in the service of charity. It is a task, the saint tells his followers, to which they should dedicate themselves "without the fear of shortening our lives, and with the firm conviction that the death which is most glorious and desirable is that which finds us with [the tools of service] in our hands."

Throughout his life Vincent, the man of action, lived these convictions and personally modeled them for his followers and for the Church at large, meriting from the Church the esteemed title of "universal patron of charity." This is the rubric

under which most people know Vincent. It is significant that they who know little else of his words have at least heard what might be the distillation of his charity, as framed in his best known counsel: "Let us love God, but let it be at the expense of our arms and in the sweat of our brows."

March, 1990

Glory to God

"Blessed are they who spend their lives for the service of God." Vincent never lost sight of the perspective that his missionaries' service to people, whether clergy or the poor, must be focused on God and his justice before all things, "to seek first the reign of God in ourselves and to procure it in others." That is, "not only to love God, but to cause him to be loved."

Indeed, "it is the intention that gives value to all our works and renders them valuable before God. Do as many good works as you please, they will profit you nothing unless they are well done." Actions thus performed take on a beauty and a worth, like garments whose cloth is enriched and ennobled by "the gold lace and rich embroidery, pearls and precious stones with which they are adorned." In a way, the outcome matters little: "God does not so much regard the success of our efforts as the charity that inspired them."

Selflessness should underlie service: "Be ever ready to inconvenience yourself in order to accommodate others." In this spirit, "let us dedicate ourselves unreservedly to God and to the service of our neighbor. Let us strip ourselves, to clothe our neighbor; let us give our lives to procure his salvation and to extend the reign of Jesus Christ."

Conversely, self-serving and self-congratulatory actions sap good works of their value. Vain complacency, Vincent asserts, is "dangerous, a poison to good works. It is a plague that corrupts the holiest of actions." He goes so far as to declare that "it would be better to be bound hand and foot and cast upon burning coals than to do an action in order to win the praise of men."

Missionaries who live and act in a mode that is directed toward "the instruction and the sanctification of the poor...verify the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church." Souls brought to salvation through our ministry will be "witnesses in our favor at the hour of death." For this reason, Vincent prays,

"May it please God to render us worthy of employing our lives, as our Lord employed his, for the salvation of his poor creatures remote from all assistance."

December, 1990

Humility, the Sure Foundation

"Who is there that does not love a humble person?" Vincent asks. "What can we do but love a person who humbles himself? He is like a valley that has been enriched by the mountains. He draws upon himself the blessings and the good will of all." True, the saint admits, everyone regards humility as "beautiful and amiable," but if so, why are there "so few who embrace it and still fewer who possess it? It is because they are content to consider it in itself without taking the trouble to acquire it."

Certainly Vincent is not content to leave it in the abstract. Admiration is not enough. He speaks in tones of reality: "Let us not deceive ourselves; if we do not have humility, we have nothing." Indeed, "we might be like angels and might excel in the greatest virtues, [but] if we are devoid of humility, those virtues, having no foundation, could not subsist." Conversely, he believes, "even though we were criminals, if we should have recourse to humility, it would make us just."

Hence, in practice the missionaries are encouraged to refrain from self-advancement and to flee from seeking honors or from actions that attract vain applause. Their origins, and those of their founder, match the condition of Jesus, who was "not only humble in his own person, but he was also humble with respect to his Little Company, [which] he formed...by degrees from poor uncouth men...." Granted, humility permits one to recognize the gifts that God has entrusted to him, yet "we are nothing more than the bearers of these gifts," which God uses through our agency. "The rod of Moses, which wrought so many prodigies, did not cease to be a piece of fragile wood."

The footing on which humility grounds the individual confrere is the same for the community house. Thus, the saint directs a superior: "Establish humility and self-abjection as the foundation of your house, and henceforth it will be a house of peace and benediction." Indeed, the superior should first set the example of humility, "as he should of all other virtues necessary for the preservation of union."

This modeling would forestall "the spirit of rivalry...the evil of communities, especially of small communities." If such a spirit takes hold, "its remedy is humility."

In truth, the ideal of the missionary is to be equable in maintaining "a truly humble spirit, as well in honors as in contempt. Imitate the bee that forms its honey as well from the dew that falls upon the wormwood as from that which falls upon the rose."

April, 1991

Life at the Foot of the Cross

"The foot of the cross is the best place in the world for you," Vincent once declared; "fervently love to dwell there." This is not advice to court suffering or affliction for their own sakes, but to identify the cross as the matrix in which human ills can find meaning. At the cross, as John Shea puts it, "God is redemptively present to every moment of human life, and therefore even in our sin and suffering we are not abandoned."

The trials and difficulties of the missionaries — temptations, sickness, death, and crosses of every kind — in many ways were basically no different from those endured by the rest of men and women. In his own life the saint had experienced many such reversals, which he welcomed as "messengers from God." They are also authentic marks of discipleship. "Whoever wishes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ should expect [these], but he should also hope that, when the occasions present themselves, God will give him the strength to bear afflictions and triumph over torments."

Nevertheless, there were trials that were proper to the life of the Congregation. Some were heavy, like failure or frustration in ministry, persecution, and even martyrdom. Others were of another gravity and of a "domestic" kind, related mainly to community living. Vincent's mode of response for all cases was ultimately reduced to the counsel of patience and forbearance, "the universal remedy." Take the challenges of the common life, for instance, an enduring problem in religion. It is almost natural, thinks Vincent, to have conflict in groups: "From whom shall we suffer unless from those who are round about us? ...From whom and by whom did our Lord suffer unless his apostles and disciples and the people among whom he lived?" Even in minimal cases of two men dwelling together, he claims, the parties "afford each other occasions for the exercise of patience. Even if you were alone you would be a burden to yourself and an object for patience." Vincent sees this at work particularly with "persons who have placed their ideal high. They have

a great need of patience even to bear with themselves."

Fidelity to religious exercises is also a trial. "Sooner or later God tries, by repugnance for religious exercises, souls that he calls to his service." This feeling will be there from the start, but, the saint admits, "It is better that this be at the beginning of a person's vocation, because he then early learns to provide a fund of patience, fortitude and self-denial — virtues whose practice is necessary at all times through life."

There are even words of comfort and encouragement to superiors for enduring the burdens of authority. From experience Vincent learned that "there is no superior in the world who has not much to bear from those under his charge...[Remember] that our Lord himself had much to endure from his disciples." Indeed, as he says to one superior anxious to be reassigned: "I know of no superior who does not ask to be relieved of his office."

There is a certain dynamism in God's action that is salutary. Thus the turmoil in one's life can be more challenging and purifying than placidity or stagnation: "The water of a swamp by reason of its being at rest, becomes foul, miry and offensive; while on the contrary, the waters of rivers and fountains that flow with rapidity among rocks and stones, are always sweet, clear and wholesome."

A more familiar image for God's action that Vincent uses is one of sculpture. The artist begins his work with such heavy blows on the rough stone "that you would think that he is about to break it into pieces." As he continues, his action and his tools become progressively more delicate, to the end that he will "fashion [the stone] with a beautiful image." Thus it is evident how God sometimes treats the soul with apparent harshness and why he does so: "He takes pleasure in enriching it with his graces, and he never ceases until he has rendered it perfectly agreeable."

Thus, says Vincent, "It is through the cross that God sanctifies souls." The missionary who lives the Christian life faithfully will encounter the mystery of the cross. An outward sign of that identification, the saint observes, will be "the stigmata of Jesus Christ [made visible in] the imitation of his virtues." This renders the cross a part of everyday life, redemptive and giving hope — a sign, notes John Shea, of "God's presence to our pain and twistedness."

November, 1991

The Virtue of 'Cool'

Saint Vincent was inclined to choose "little" virtues to characterize his followers; that is, virtues that effect modesty and self-effacement and that serve to minimize the indulgent self that is so much an obstacle to grace.

Akin to the five virtues that specifically define the missionaries' vocation (simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, zeal for souls) is another that Vincent regarded highly, what a modern might call the virtue of "cool." Or call it "tranquility of spirit," as he did. Without this quality, he believed, "it is impossible to succeed in any exercise...." Tranquility is a state of mind that mirrors "the heart of our Lord...[who is] tranquility itself." To stand in that relation to him is a "supreme honor" to be "in a condition to serve him."

Tranquility has a restraining effect on the impulses. "The spirit of the world is restless, and wishes to accomplish everything; leave it to itself...Distrust the fervor of nature...Moderate your ardor and weigh matters maturely in the scales of the sanctuary." The affairs of God, on the other hand, are accomplished "little by little and...imperceptibly, and his spirit operates without commotion or violence...The soul under the divine influence is always serene and humble...The good that God wishes is done of itself, as it were, without our being aware of it...[and] loses nothing by the absence of man's activity." Indeed, "he who is precipitate retards the things of God."

Thus tranquility fosters "true wisdom, [which] consists in following providence step by step." Wisdom disposes the soul for listening to the inspirations of God, which are "serene and peaceful, inclining us lovingly toward the good that he desires of us." While admitting that "the human mind is quick and restless," Vincent observes that "the most active and most enlightened minds are not the best, if, at the same time, they are not the most cautious. Those walk securely who do not wander from the road that has been traveled by the majority of the wise." If, in fact, necessity demands haste, "do so moderately."

Again, tranquility also provides a climate conducive to discernment. "Only to souls who possess tranquility is true discernment given, for as anger is a passion that disturbs reason, the contrary virtue is necessary to give discernment." Examples from the wisdom of the saints tell us that "a thing of importance concerning the glory of God and the good of the Church, which has been done after serious prayer and consultation, must be regarded as having been well done." When God eventually does communicate himself, "he does so without effort, in a sensible manner, full of sweetness, meekness and love."

A final fruit of tranquility is peace — "peace...worth more than all the goods of the world." Vincent sees the kingdom of God as "peace in the Holy Spirit, who shall reign in you, if you are in peace." And if in turn the heart is at peace, "you shall thereby pay sovereign honor to the God of peace and love."

The peace, too, is many-faceted. It touches not only the individual, but it is a quality that has consequences in both community life and the apostolate. With it comes "the spirit of Jesus Christ...a spirit of union and peace." With that spirit the confreres would be one with each other at home, and be effective in their ministry abroad. As Vincent put it, "How would you be able to attract souls to him if you were not united to one another and to him?"

The frequency of Vincent's exhortations could form a litany against fretting:

"Live in peace."
"Keep yourself tranquil."
"Courage! Be not disquieted."
"Let your heart be at peace."

"Cool it!" he is saying. "Oh what a grand lesson our Lord has given us, by not hurrying in the little things that he did!" These results are not without their pain. As the gardener knows, "a way of enabling trees to grow very high is to cut off some of the branches." Likewise, Vincent says, you must "retrench...your natural ardor." In speaking thus, the saint is not dealing in abstractions. His own practice of prudential restraint in coming to decisions stands as an example of the caution that he promotes. If there is any question about the wisdom of this approach, one need only look at the rich harvest that Vincent's ministry reaped for both his Congregation and the Church.

February, 1992

"The Virtue I Particularly Love"

In a confessional moment Vincent once declared, "Simplicity is the virtue which I particularly love, and to which, it seems to me, I am most attracted in my actions." Perhaps he felt thus because he found it the quality most characteristic of God himself, "who is most simple, or rather he is simplicity itself. And wherever there is simplicity there also God is to be found."

In addition to his own experience of the personal rewards from the practice of simplicity, Vincent acknowledges the universal approval that descends upon those so graced. It is evident, for instance, that our Lord himself "visibly blesses simple and candid souls and imparts many graces to them." Elsewhere, the saint observes that "the good pleasure of God is to converse with the simple of heart." And the straightforward person, that is, the one "who tells things simply as they are in themselves...is, in my opinion, very pleasing to God." Indeed, God is pleased "only by humility of heart and by simplicity."

Similarly, one's fellow human beings value this attitude. "Everyone loves simple and candid persons, who use neither artifice nor deceit, who proceed with simplicity and speak with sincerity." Even those "who have neither candor nor simplicity in their spirit or their words, nevertheless love those qualities in others." Not only is this group affected by such directness, they can even be touched by it: "The best means of being helpful to cunning and crafty people is to act with them in the spirit of great simplicity."

Simplicity draws God down upon us, as it were, and, from our perspective, it leads us to him. Thus, "the joy and contentment of God, if we may use such an expression, is to dwell with the humble and simple, when they themselves dwell in the knowledge of their own abjection." On our part, "simplicity makes us go straight to God and to the truth, without ostentation, evasion or disguise and without being influenced by our own interests or by human respect." And a person without this mind is one whom "God deprives of an insight into Christian truths and virtue."

This desire for simplicity reached even into Vincent's concern about preaching, which is a separate, major topic in itself. It is sufficient to note one of his observations on this score that "God blesses those who preach simply and devoutly...[He] blesses sermons which are delivered in an ordinary and familiar tone, because he himself taught and preached in this manner...and the people prefer it, and derive greater fruit from it." It is not "the pomp of words" that convinces, but "simplicity and humility."

Simplicity indeed was a pervasive theme in Vincent's life — in his thinking, in his ministry, in his personal behavior. His own words defined him: a personality endowed with a directness and a transparency that endeared him to people and attracted them to his company. Simplicity explained in part his success in entering so many lives and feeling welcomed there. Whoever encountered him knew that they were meeting the authentic Vincent de Paul, nothing more, nothing less.

April, 1992

That Beautiful Virtue

And what is that? "Mercy," says Vincent, who praised it as "the proper attribute of God himself...[who] bestows the spirit of mercy." For this reason, the saint urges his missionaries, "Let us be at all times men of mercy, if we wish to do in all things and everywhere the will of God."

Mercy is a facet of charity that calls us, first, to identify in spirit with the other person. For instance, Vincent suggests, "To be compassionate toward the sufferings of our neighbor and to weep with him...to soften our hearts and to render them responsive to [his] sufferings and miseries." Indeed, "love gains for us an entrance into the hearts of others." Mercy calls as well for outward signs or gestures. As Vincent observed, "Heart and hand should go together as far as possible." Consequently, he urges, "Weep with your poor and your sick. God has appointed you to be their consolation...Serve the sick with gentleness, compassion and love." As Jesus wept over Jerusalem, so should the missionary reveal sympathy in his countenance. And "speak sympathetically so as to let the neighbor see how profoundly [you] share in his interests and sufferings." Even when away from the poor, the saint showed that they, or their afflictions, are not to be forgotten, as he fretted during one winter, "Here indeed is a rigorous season. What shall become of the poor, and where shall they go? Herein is my affliction and my sorrow."

This call to identification with others is a reminder that "we are members of one mystical body, of which our Lord is the head...[so that] if we are to reign with him in heaven we should, like him, sympathize with all his members on earth." If even dumb creation is sensitive to the sufferings of each other, "for a much greater reason should the bond of common sympathy exist among men and especially among Christians."

Mercy calls for another type of sympathy — toward sinners. Vincent's compassion stemmed from his own self-awareness, for "as I am a great sinner, I cannot reject those who are great sinners, provided they have good will." Similarly,

it is profitable for his Congregation to reflect "for a little how much we stand in need of mercy ourselves — we who should show it to others, bring it with us into all sorts of places, and suffer all things for its sake." If God is tolerant and understanding, it is wise for us to follow: "Let us imitate the goodness of God, who never reproaches us with the faults he has forgiven us." And if it happens that "hearts are barred to you, make every advance in manifesting goodness toward [them]." From Francis de Sales he learned tolerance and understanding. Said Vincent, "Habituate yourself to judge the best of things and persons, at all times and under all circumstances. 'If an action has a hundred faces,' says the blessed bishop of Geneva, 'look at the best.'"

Vincent recognized that the mercy and the charity characteristic of Christian practice also have a special place in the religious life, for "charity is the cement that binds communities to God and persons to one another." And for the individual confrere, "Fraternal charity is a mark of predestination, since by it a person is recognized as a true disciple of Jesus Christ." There is something, too, for superiors, who are urged to "treat with gentleness those under your authority, continue to govern them with your customary wisdom and mildness."

To Vincent, "our life...is a moment of time (to use) for the sake of mercy." Because life is fleeting and elusive — "a moment which flies away and disappears immediately" — there is an urgency in seizing the moment of mercy. The saint finds regret in his own life, as he laments, "Alas! the seventy-five years of my life that have passed away now seem to me to be only a dream, only a moment, and nothing now remains to me but regret at having employed this moment so badly." In the same spirit he cautions his missionaries: "Let us reflect how grieved we shall be when we come to die if we have not made use of this moment to be merciful."

Among his hopes for his Congregation Vincent prays for God "to give us this spirit of mercy and compassion, to replenish us with it, to preserve it in us so that whoever sees a missionary may be able to say: 'There goes a man who is full of mercy.'" And how would that person be recognized? Vincent would suggest: "Let us show mercy to all so that we shall never meet a poor person again without consoling him...nor an ignorant one without teaching him in a few words all that he is bound to believe...and do for his salvation...."

The prayer of the missionaries, in turn, should be that we not "make a bad use of our vocation...[that God] not take the spirit of mercy from the Company, for what would become of us, O Lord, if you would withdraw your mercy from us?"

May-June, 1992

The Virtue of Perspective

"It is not so important for us to live a long time as to continue in the vocation to which God has called us...." In this letter to one of his priests who had expressed undue anxiety about his health, Vincent puts a spin on his response that counters what seems a notion of conventional wisdom. The "reasonable" advice to expect here is that the quantity of a life in doing good holds more value than a shorter one. Maybe so, but Vincent's point is that the focus and the intensity of a life, brief or long, are more important than length of days.

These words reflect the unexpected slant that Vincent gives to much of his advice. There were many queries that came his way or initiatives that he took to advise a confrere: perhaps to clarify an ambiguity or to counter an insensitivity in his correspondent; to illumine some facet of the truth that the inquirer overlooked or to make a point that he might have missed. Vincent's wisdom in these instances arises out of a perspective born of his peasant good sense alone, or out of that common sense informed by faith. But in responding he gives an unexpected twist to his words, so that his statements take an aphoristic, paradoxical turn.

Thus Vincent replies to a missionary who asked permission to take the discipline. The saint cautioned against such an overzealous request with the reminder that "we can fall into excess in the practice of the virtues, and that excess is sometimes a greater evil than the failure to practice them." Indeed, there are people "who find sensual and shameful pleasure in that sort of thing." After further thought Vincent relented, and he permitted the request with very restrictive conditions that would forestall the priest's falling into the excess, reminding his confrere that "merit comes not so much in pain as in love."

Moderation is always paramount, he insisted, as he did when advising Monsieur Portail to curb the length of a visitation: "Those which drag on are not usually very successful." Or in his advice to Étienne Blatiron to take care of himself, even if Cardinal Durazzo in his zeal overworks the missionaries: " ...In the final

analysis, virtue is not found in extremes, but in prudence, which I recommend as strongly as I can...."

A serenity born of faith underlies other responses, as he advised about the poverty suffered in a house at La Rose: "Things arrange themselves with time. Only God can have everything to his liking. His servants should act as our Lord did." In less tangible areas, do not look for "results," Vincent tells Blatiron, who is discouraged that no one is "profiting" from his mission or that his opinions are not being accepted: "...Are you not willing to accept that our efforts and prayers may be ineffectual, if such is God's good pleasure? For, Monsieur, what would it be like if everything was favorable to us, and what right have poor people like us to expect that we shall always be successful?" And as to contradictions: "We have even less reason to be upset when someone offers resistance to our humble opinions." After all, Vincent concludes, "Since God is satisfied with our good will and honest efforts, let us also be satisfied with the outcome he gives to them." With this frame of mind "our actions will never be without good results."

Even Vincent's customary attitude toward the use of authority occasionally emerges in an unexpected way. Take the advice to Philip Le Vacher, a missionary and papal appointee as vicar-general of Carthage. The appointment had both ecclesiastical and pastoral implications. In this case Vincent advised in favor of pastoral responses concerning the Christian slaves. Whatever the abuses, "do not take a hard line" against them, if greater harm can result. "Use gentle methods," the saint continues, "to get whatever you can from priests and monks who are slaves, as well as from merchants and captives. Resort to severe measures only in extreme cases for fear lest the hardship they are already enduring in their state of captivity, joined to the severity you might want to exercise in virtue of your authority, drive them to despair. You are not responsible for their salvation, as you think. You have been sent to Algiers only to console afflicted souls, to encourage them to bear their sufferings, and to help them to persevere in our holy religion. That is your main concern and not the office of vicar general, which you have accepted only to the extent that it serves as a means to attain the aforementioned ends."

Vincent fired out counsel in every direction: to his missionaries about mundane affairs; to Saint Louise and her Daughters about details peculiar to their lives; to clerics, nobles and politicians about matters of church and state. The wisdom of the saint in these messages is found not in grandiose sentiments but more often in pointed statements of good sense. Whatever the occasion, a response from Vincent usually took an unexpected, perhaps unconventional, turn that conveyed an answer, true, but also disclosed the distinctive perspective out of which he viewed life.

January, 1993

Prudence, the Preventive Virtue

"A doctor who preserves a man from sickness," said Vincent, "deserves more than he does who cures him." This concept of prevention is a familiar one, based on the principle that action is usually more salutary than reaction. For the saint this same notion underlay the meaning of the virtue of prudence.

It is a virtue that calls for foresight, discretion, restraint and proportion. Vincent sees its purpose "to regulate and govern both words and actions [and judgment, he would include elsewhere]...." It disposes us "to speak wisely and to the point. The prudent man acts as he should, when he should, and for the end he should. He does all things according to weight and measure." Accordingly, for making choices confidently, the saint advises that "for an apparent and uncertain good we should not abandon a real and present good." Similarly, restraint calls for withholding oneself from novelty, from "too readily pursuing new notions." For this reason "great perseverance in our first intentions is necessary."

As usual, Vincent relies on the example of Jesus to give credibility and force to his teaching. Take it as "an inviolable rule," he says, "to judge of all things as our Lord judged them, so that on all occasions we should ask ourselves how [he] under similar circumstances, judged of such things." In addition to judging, prudence includes "speaking and acting as the eternal wisdom of God, clothed in our frail flesh, judged, spoke and acted."

Vincent always distinguishes between that kind of prudence and the "purely human" kind. The latter is based upon "what people say, or upon the fear of making enemies. [It] furnishes low and miserable motives, which defeat the interests of God and of his Church." In some ways "human prudence" can be an acceptable path to decision, but insufficient. In such cases where it "fails (or) does not see at all," says the saint, one should seek the path where "the light of divine wisdom begins to dawn."

Prudence seems always to have a companion. Simplicity, for instance, is

one. Vincent considers them "like two inseparable sisters." Simplicity will drive one "to do all things unostentatiously, without pomp or show, choosing ways and means the most humble, as well as the most charitable in order not to excite the envy or the contradiction of men." The notion about this pairing echoed the prescription of Jesus in the gospel, about combining the prudence of the serpent with the simplicity of the dove, and found its way into Vincent's *Common Rules.*

Prudence is important for the person in authority, whether in making decisions or in taking action: "It is very important that those who govern should do nothing of consequence, only after having taken the advice of two or three." Far from its "being improper to take advice," it is, on the contrary, Vincent insists, "necessary to do so when the matter is something of importance and when we are unable of ourselves to reach a decision." Indeed, the superior who wisely takes counsel "renders [his] authority more worthy of love and respect."

In some cases wide consultation might be called for, including outside advisors: "In temporal matters the advice of attorneys or other intelligent externs is [to be] sought." And locally, "with regard to internal affairs...the officers of the house are consulted, as also other members of the Community when this is deemed expedient."

Providence is also a necessary partner in the equation. Vincent rarely advises about intended actions without a reminder to heed the voice of providence, which gives perspective to the rightness of the decision. As he wrote to Bernard Codoing in Rome, who was worried about some affairs in other places, Vincent says, somewhat impatiently, "Stop being concerned about things happening far away that are none of your business...Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God...and put our feet only in the place it has marked out for us." And, in a later letter to Codoing, he says that it has been "a consolation our Lord gives me...to believe that, by the grace of God, we have always tried to follow and not to anticipate providence which knows how to conduct all things so wisely to the end our Lord destines for them."

Vincent is likewise strong on the responsibility of the individual confrere to seek counsel in personal matters, with especial reliance upon the superior. Although nowadays this path to wisdom (that is, via the superior) is not as absolute or exclusive as it was for Vincent, it was, in his view, an important factor in seeking God's will: "By taking counsel of your superiors, you will avoid many inconveniences and you will be assured of the will of God." Similarly, "take the advice of those whose mission it is to counsel you. God, ordinarily, is found in their advice."

"It is not enough to do good, but to do it well," said Vincent. Because his communities are essentially active, the members thus would be concerned with "doing"; and if "well," to exercise care in the doing. Vincent saw prudence as an aid

to wise performance. The virtue counsels foresight and deliberation. It forestalls precipitate action, calculates possible consequences, and yet demands action when it is time to act, that is, as he says regarding this last, to trusting more in providence than in our own precaution. Above all, because apostolic works are intentional and directed toward the glory of God, prudence helps to focus motivation. For Vincent this point is the culmination of the virtue, whereby service to God is perfected, in that excellence in intention converges with effectiveness in execution. Vincent caught the essence of this combination when he said, "God is greatly honored by the time that is taken to consider maturely the things that concern his service."

February, 1993

Simplicity: a Countercultural Virtue

"Simplicity" and "countercultural" put together seems a contradiction in terms. "Countercultural" might suggest an aggressive advocacy, whereas "simplicity" is more static. Simplicity speaks for itself against its opposites: "Since prudence of the flesh and hypocrisy are so prevalent in this corrupt age, to the prejudice of the spirit of Christianity," Vincent once said, "the best way to overcome their baneful influence is by a true and sincere simplicity." And according to his biographer, Louis Abelly, the saint certainly conducted himself in this manner: he was "simple, rejecting all pretense, duplicity, artifice, or prudence of the flesh." Even when he forgot or delayed some responsibility, he made no excuses or invented no explanation, even to the point of embarrassment, preferring to state things as they were.

Others who came into contact with him had the same impression of consistency, as did the bishop who, after repeated meetings with the saint, was able to characterize him in this famous comment: "Monsieur Vincent is always Monsieur Vincent; that is, he is as humble, affable and prompt to serve everyone as he was before being called to the Court. He has falsified the proverb that says 'honors destroy virtue.'"

Simplicity is virtually its own reward, as might be implied from Vincent's own experience and from his remarks to his confreres: "Look around our own group to consider those in whom this virtue is particularly noticeable. Are they not the most lovable?" They do not work to be so, it is just who they are and the impression they convey.

He shared another example he had from the field. His missionaries, he learned, usually received better acceptance than the resident clergy in many places. These clergy, he said, "did recite the breviary, celebrate mass and administer the sacraments, however, poorly, but that is all. Even worse, they lived in vice and disorder." In response to these reactions, he told his own men, "Even if you do not

say a word you may touch hearts merely by your presence, if only you are wholly taken up by God...[Two priests on a mission] went in surplice from their house to the church, then back again without saying a word. Their recollection was so remarkable that it made a strong impression on those who saw them, never having experienced the like. Their modesty was a silent sermon so efficacious, I am told, that it may have contributed more than anything else to the success of this mission."

In another situation, where the people lacked simplicity, he warned a missionary he was sending there, "You are going to a region where the people are for the most part cunning and devious. If that is so, the best way to be of help to them is to treat them with great simplicity. The maxims of the gospel are utterly opposed to those of the world. Since you are going there to serve our Lord, you ought to carry his spirit, a spirit of uprightness and simplicity."

Simplicity, as Vincent once described it, is the virtue that causes one "to act directly and forthrightly, always in view of God, in our business, our employment, or in our exercises of piety, avoiding all hypocrisy, artifice, or vain pretense." The virtue arises out of honesty, "which never allows us to do one thing but really mean another." Thus, simplicity is violated in those "who through human respect wish to appear other than what they are, or who do good deeds exteriorly to be thought virtuous, who collect quantities of books to be judged learned, who strive to preach well to have the applause and praise of others, or...who do their spiritual exercises or pious works for unworthy motives."

This virtue, indeed, finds its model in God, who is "very simple, or better...is simplicity itself, and therefore where one finds simplicity one finds God." In this spirit the saint admonished one of his missionaries who had acted otherwise, "God is never honored by duplicity, and...to be truly simple we must think of him alone...[for, as he said elsewhere] God is the only end of all our actions."

As Vincent's life reveals, simplicity was one of his defining virtues and one which he left to his followers as part of his legacy. The virtue was a personal value, but it also set him apart from many cultural values surrounding him that were contrary to the maxims of the gospel. Given the love and the admiration that he elicited from his contemporaries, and the credibility that he enjoyed, we must surmise that this modest man, and the simple, direct qualities he possessed, was powerful enough to affect an age.

March, 1994

Mortification: a Countercultural Virtue

Just to say "mortification" is a countercultural act, and the very thought of self-denial in a self-indulgent culture is an alien notion. Consequently anyone who would promote mortification is working against the tide.

Mortification is an evangelical maxim that is based upon the insistence by Jesus that to be his disciple one had to deny the self and take up the cross daily. As such it naturally opposes the maxims of "the world," that is, those contrary to the gospel.

The virtue is thus one that Vincent identified as essential for gospel living: for himself, for his missionaries as characteristic of their state, indeed for any would-be followers. It was not an abstraction to Vincent. He put into personal practice what he advised his missionaries: "We should preach penance to others in vain if we are not mortified and if there is no sign of it in our actions and conduct."

He needed the virtue in order to exorcize some of his own demons. One of these was his temperament. In later years Vincent came to be admired for his meek and calm demeanor, but it was one that came about only with strong discipline. He was conscious at one time of his "curt and forbidding disposition," but, sensitive about its effects, he prayed for change to "a meek and benign one." Eventually, he acknowledged, that "by the grace of God and with some effort on my part...[I was able]...to repress the outbursts of passion [and] get rid of my black disposition."

Another was attachment to his family that brought its own set of tensions that needed balancing. Vincent never abandoned his love for his family, but he struggled to keep them at arm's length, so that they would not be a distraction from his work, as he responded once to a suggestion to help some relatives known to be in need: "Do you think I do not love my relatives? I indeed have the same sentiments of affection for them that anyone would have. My natural instinct is to help them, but I must act according to the movements of grace, and not those of

nature. I should think of those poor persons who are even worse off, rather than of my friends and relatives."

In promoting mortification to his missionaries Vincent reflected, in part, his own struggles. He was mindful of his own experience, for instance, when he warned of undue attachment to family. Likewise, in encouraging meekness he sometimes felt, even at an advanced age, that he had not entirely established that discipline in his own life: "O wretch that I am! I have been studying this lesson [of meekness] for so long and have not yet learned it! I fly into a passion; I lose my temper; I complain; I find fault...."

For the missionary the virtue called for personal restraint in tempering his judgment, his senses, and any strong, disordered feelings. Similarly, it entailed coping with sickness and living without undue anxiety about his health. These are areas open to self-deception and rationalization. "Woe to him who shuns the cross!" Vincent warned. "The man who makes little of exterior mortification on the plea that interior mortifications are far more perfect shows clearly that he is not mortified, either interiorly or exteriorly."

The saint also identified many occasions in community life, both at home and on the missions, that demanded mortification. "If we are not animated by the spirit of self-denial," he asked, "how can we live together?" There are criticisms to deal with, from among their own numbers and sometimes from the aggravation of non-members. There are challenges equally at work on the missions, if of a different sort: kind and conditions of lodgings, the state of the parish, and other varying circumstances. And so, Vincent asked, "If we are not mortified how can we endure what must be endured in varied employments [like dealing with the poor people, persons in retreat, the ordinands, convicts and slaves]? ...Let us not deceive ourselves, my brothers. Missionaries stand in need of self-denial."

Thus, the aim of the virtue of mortification, according to Vincent, is "to divest ourselves of whatsoever displeases God," that is, to act in opposition to "worldly values." Although seemingly negative in its thrust, the virtue does not promote mere avoidance, but rather encourages action of a kind that ultimately responds to the challenge of Saint Paul: "If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

April, 1994

Murphy's Law and Divine Providence

"How are things going?" the man asked.

"Pretty good," the other replied.

"Only pretty good?"

"Well, if I said 'Fine!' sure enough something will come along to chase the feeling away, and so I play it safe."

Call this an ethnic phobia (name any ethnic group, it would fit), call it a belief in Murphy's Law, that if anything can go wrong, it probably will. Whatever its source, it reflects a mild fatalism that taints the prospects for peace of mind with fear of something worse happening.

It is idle to ask whether Vincent had Murphy's Law to contend with in his culture (Boudreaux's Law or some such?), because it seems a universal human temptation to fear the worst, no matter how joyous the moment. For Vincent, however, belief in providence put his reliance on divine guidance of events rather than on caprice. That belief calls for a delicate balance in approaching events, both before they occur and after: "Grace has its moments," the saint once told a missionary. "Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God and be on our guard against anticipating it." And, once arrived at a decision to proceed, "[Let us] put our feet only on the paths providence has marked out for us." Even if something unfortunate happened subsequently, the cause would be more than just a perverse turn of events.

If anything would go wrong in an enterprise, it was usually for good reason, as for instance, Vincent would think, "the poor success of things [because they are] done too precipitously." Proper timing is all. Even offering advice too hastily was

suspect, because it reflected one's personal judgment rather than awaiting the inspiration of the Spirit. In reassuring a confrere about the security that reliance on providence brings, the saint testified from his own experience with the Congregation: "Reflecting on all the principal events that have taken place in this Company," he recalled, "it seems to me quite evident that, if they had taken place before they did, they would not have been successful. I say it of all of them, without exception. That is why I have a particular devotion to following the adorable providence of God step by step. My only consolation is that I think our Lord alone has carried on and is constantly carrying on the business of the Little Company...Let us take refuge in this, trusting that [he] will bring about what he wishes to be done among us."

Detachment and indifference are twin virtues that accompany belief in providence and put one in a proper stance toward the will of God. Detachment is the ability to stand apart from persons or things that could be obstacles to growth in resignation. Many tragedies struck Vincent in his Congregation: he saw his missionaries shipwrecked on the way to Madagascar, dead of the plague in Italy, imprisoned in Barbary, victimized by the religious wars, and the Company struck by the loss of the farm at Orsigny. In all of them his reaction usually began with the utterance "Blessed be God" and went on to a statement of acceptance. There were no exceptions to his resignation to events. Even the future of his Congregation was not spared: so intensely did he feel about fidelity to God's work that he prayed at one time that God "destroy us if we are not useful to him in his service."

Indifference, as Vincent described it, "leads us to be so detached from creatures and so united to the will of the creator that we are almost totally freed from any desire for one thing rather than another...." There is equanimity in accepting what happens or does not happen: a person is neither elated by prosperity nor cast down by adversity. On one occasion Vincent showed that kind of restraint and control in the way that he responded to a possible favor offered the Congregation. He was in no hurry to act. "I think we should allow this matter to simmer for the time being...," he cautioned. "It will help us develop holy indifference, and allow our Lord to manifest his will while we offer our prayers for this intention. We can be sure that, if he wishes it, it shall come about...The less there is of ourselves in this, the more he will make it his own."

One man's patience breeds another's exasperation. Vincent's well known slow and deliberate pace — and others' reactions — reflects not indecision, but rather a prudent wait for assurance about God's will. It is a further paradox that for all this apparent procrastination, the designation, "man of action," is one of the saint's most prominent titles in the Church to honor his remarkable accomplishments. "I have never yet seen," he wrote to one of his missionaries, "anything spoiled by my slowness to take action, but everything has been done in its

own good time, with the necessary foresight and precautions."

Indeed, the saint believed, "God is greatly *honored* [emphasis added] by the time taken in considering all those matters that concern his service." For his part, the missionary will find meaning and value in his works according to the care he brings to them, that is, "by seeking God in them and by doing them in order to find him in them, rather than just to get them done."

Was Vincent excessive in his reliance on providence? To someone who wondered aloud about whether one can offend by having too much of the hope and confidence he should have in God, the saint replied, "Just as we cannot have too much faith in the truths of the faith so we cannot trust in God too much." There are, of course, conditions under which a false hope operates, e.g. hoping for something God has not promised, or seeking God's mercy without undergoing conversion. But "true hope," the saint concluded, "can never be excessive since it is founded on the goodness of God and on the merits of Jesus Christ."

"Chance" and "surprise" would seem to have no place in Vincent's active vocabulary, for in his perception of events nothing was capricious or startling. Belief in a benign providence put him in a special stance toward reality: it spared him shock from the unexpected and the irrational, and opened him to acceptance of them. Knowing that the wisdom of God directed events, Vincent was able to maintain a serenity in their midst, no matter what "laws," rational or otherwise, seemed to be operative.

November, 1994

The Gift of Tongues

"The whole world spoke the same language, using the same words," said the biblical writer to describe an idyllic condition of the races that antedated the world of the tower of Babel. Subsequently, because of the increasing wickedness into which the people were falling, "the Lord confused the speech of all the world." Thus the tower of Babel became a symbol of the diversity of languages among peoples that formed a barrier to their mutual understanding.

The Pentecost experience is the antithesis of Babel, because it brings harmony and understanding rather than chaos. All those who received the Spirit "as of tongues of fire," began with a common language among themselves, but as they proclaimed the experience, their auditors heard them speak "in different tongues as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim." The auditors, in turn, were "astounded and in amazement" that "each of us hears [the disciples] in his own native language...Parthians, Medes, Elamites...."

In a community "Repetition of Prayer," held on the Feast of Pentecost (9 June 1658), Vincent invoked this image of tongues, first celebrating this gift to the Church at the coming of the Spirit, but immediately transposing the notion into a pragmatic image for his missionaries: "I think we should do well today to ask God to give us the grace to learn foreign languages thoroughly, for the sake of those who are to be sent to distant lands...."

It was not presumptuous to seek this gift, for as providence has raised up "this Little Company to preach the gospel throughout the world as the apostles did, [so] it is necessary for us to share with them the gift of tongues, since it is so essential for teaching the people the doctrines of our faith." In the modern case, however, this was not a gift spontaneously given as it was to the apostles, but something to be sought, in prayer and through one's labors. "How can [missionaries] learn other languages," he asked, "if they do not ask God to teach them and devote themselves to the study of them?"

Vincent became more conscious of this need as he spread further the net of his missionary endeavors. He was already sending men to Poland, Italy, England, Ireland, and Madagascar, and would have liked to extend the list. Learning the native tongue was a priority among Vincent's instructions to missionaries destined for these places. He admired the practice of the Jesuits: "One of the first things done by those who are sent to a country of whose language they are ignorant is to set about learning it; they make that their chief study; they get in touch with someone from the country, or someone who understands the language...." Even the niceties of language differences are important, as the Jesuits discovered among the various tribal languages of the native Americans.

Perseverance in study was important. The first reaction of some missionaries is discouragement at their initial labors. "There are some," Vincent observed, "who imagine, when they get [to the mission country] that they will never succeed. They grow discouraged after some attempts and, instead of praying and trusting in God to make progress therein, instead of waiting patiently for this favor from his goodness, they lose their desire to remain, and persuade themselves that they are only fit for their own country and, behold, they attempt to return." On one occasion Vincent expressed his double disappointment about the unresponsive confreres under Jean Martin, superior at Turin: "I am distressed by the meager help you are getting from your men and the lack of enthusiasm some show for the language of the country and the functions of the Company."

On the other hand, Vincent was happy to hear cases of application, as he was, for instance, on hearing from Charles Nacquart on his attempts to learn the Malagasy language, while he is on his way to Madagascar, and when finally on the island to get in touch with a Frenchman who understood the native language. Likewise with the Polish mission: "I am very glad to hear how Monsieurs Durand, Eveillard and Simon are applying themselves to the Polish language and of the progress they are making. Please congratulate them for me...[especially] Monsieur Duperroy for applying himself so well that he now teaches catechism in Polish, so I am told."

Vincent himself had no occasion to leave his native France that would compel him to learn another language. However, he showed a willingness to stretch himself beyond conventional language when necessary, as he did in his friendship with Lambert aux Couteaux, superior at Richelieu. When the saint was in Picardy, Lambert's native district, he tried to speak the dialect — a struggle, he admitted. On one occasion Lambert's cousin, on a visit to Saint-Lazare, had a pleasant meeting with Vincent, who said about their conversation: "We spoke a great deal in the Picard dialect but with this difference: he did his best to speak good French and I to speak good Picard."

This concern of Vincent for the gift of tongues was an expression of his

abiding zeal for evangelization. The possibilities in Turin were symbolic of the mission everywhere — "a beautiful harvest," as he described Monsieur Martin's apostolate. There was a sadness, however, that accompanied those missionaries there and elsewhere who were hampered by ignorance of the language. The feeling would not be permanent, the saint promised, but it would change to joy according to the missionaries' efforts to learn. Indeed the hope of "a beautiful harvest," Vincent believed, should stir up the zeal of any missionary to seek the gift of tongues.

January, 1995

The Virtue of "Modification"

I once heard someone mistakenly call mortification the virtue of "modification." It is easy to see how that is possible for a person who is a stranger to the lingo. Actually, the mix-up is not too far off the mark. The words do have a similar ring and, upon a closer look, do suggest a natural kinship: both entail some change, some trimming, some reduction.

Vincent saw mortification as a basic value for the Christian life, indeed a prerequisite. It begins and ends in Jesus Christ, who put mortification as a condition for discipleship: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." The saint saw the process as renunciation of "judgment, senses, will, passions, and so on."

As was his custom, Vincent pointed to the particular example of Jesus Christ, who first practiced whatever behavior he was later to advocate. The most fundamental act, Vincent noted, was Jesus' declaration at the beginning that his work was to do the will of the one who sent him. In living out a life in accordance with the Father's will, Jesus accepted whatever conditions fell to his family: he experienced a simple life and its attendant frugality and privations. In the family he practiced obedience in subjecting his will and his judgment to those entrusted with his care. In his public ministry he endured the hardships of travel and, more importantly, the opposition and hostility to his message, to the point of surrendering his life.

Vincent sought to match his confreres' experiences in mortification with those of Jesus, if not literally, at least in that spirit. Thus, the missionaries would be expected to orient their lives by subjection to the will of the Father, which is "the grace to remain always in the disposition of doing his will, obeying his commandments, the rules of our state of life and the orders of obedience...." They were to live in the spirit of simplicity and detachment similar to that which Jesus displayed. They were encouraged to live by selflessness instead of self-promotion,

that is, to seek "the grace to rid ourselves of ourselves...to resist the love of self, which is the root of all our sensuality." Finally, to practice detachment: from relatives, from frivolities, from inordinate actions of the senses or the emotions, from excessive preoccupation with health.

Thus mortification is compatible with "modification," that is, a certain tempering of behavior or of some aspects of human life that might need tighter management, direction or discipline.

Vincent's own practices of mortification are more admirable in the telling than in the imitation: sleeping on a bare cot without a mattress, in a room without a fire; even foregoing legitimate comforts, as when he was sick, whereby he "endured" for the sake of mortification the special attention his brothers showed him. It was expressed in the hair shirts, the discipline, and other instruments of mortification he hid from view, and in the violence to his senses. There were intangibles, too, like bearing with resignation the bad news about his Congregation and the members.

And yet there was no flashy display of the virtue. In fact, as his biographer Abelly says, the saint for good reasons kept much of it hidden: "[Vincent] certainly did not project an image of an extremely austere life. He judged that a life seemingly more ordinary would succeed better in the service of the people and the clergy to which God had called him...[and] would also be closer to that of Jesus Christ and the holy apostles...He felt obliged to give the example of a well ordered life, neither too strict, ...too lenient, ...too rigorous. In private, mortifying his interior faculties to have them both perfectly submissive to the will of God. His way of doing this was the more excellent and more holy in that it was concealed from the eyes of others."

In the end, Vincent believed, mortification was a sign of true discipleship: "The way to know if a person follows our Lord is to see if he mortifies himself continually." In this way comes assurance that the Company "shall then walk in the narrow way which leads to life; Jesus Christ will then reign in us during this mortal life and we in him in life eternal."

September, 1995

"First The Heart, Then The Work."

Vincent de Paul was very much up-to-date in dealing with a question that is still current in religious life and among those given to altruistic service to the neighbor. He spent a lot of energy demonstrating to his followers that each person had meaning and value apart from the work in which he or she was engaged. Personal identity was not exclusively derived from one's work, but from one's inner worth and its direction. One comment of his to the Daughters of Charity, for instance, without specifying any particular work — whether teacher, nurse, social worker — reaches to the core of identity: "You are poor Daughters of Charity," he told them, "who have given yourselves to God for the service of the poor."

Even today, strangers of all types, trying to connect with each other, will use the icebreaker, "What do you do?" as if identifying one's line of work ultimately defines the person. Indeed, if work did define value, then that worth would disappear when the work was over, such as through retirement or sickness. Or one's value in religion would be measured according to the salary one commanded, or the prestige of the job, or the "success" one achieves in the work.

Motive — that is, the intention — is what marks one's identity in the apostolate, and not the external nature of the work. Vincent grasped the reality of Saint Paul's advice to the Colossians: "Whatever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus...." This is equally true of any demand that God makes, whether it be of conversion — "Rend your hearts and not your garments" — or of authentic sacrifice — "My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite heart." Vincent reinforces this notion: "Do you think, Sisters, that it is any great thing to act as you do unless you elevate your actions by a good intention? ...Do you think that to serve the poor because it amuses you, to obey because you like what you have been told to do, to labor because one cannot exist without some employment, to pray because others do so, is to accomplish your duty? Certainly not, Sisters, do not deceive yourselves; the merit of our actions depends upon the end for which you perform

them." What is of central importance, Vincent goes on to conclude, is that God "first of all demands the heart and then the work."

To speak of heart and work separately is not to express the realities as totally divided. The truly apostolic person fuses motive and work. The thought of Saint Louise runs parallel to Vincent's: "[Sisters], may you never take the attitude of merely getting a job done. You must serve from the heart...." In our own day Thomas Merton, on this topic, observed that religious action is not a double activity of performing the work and looking to God. Rather, work should be union with God, the person finding God in the work, not just in doing his will, but by seeking him in the truth of what is being done. To act in this frame of mind, moreover, is to assure the work is done well and to achieve peace and satisfaction in its performance.

Vincent anticipated the temptation that would occur when a person would look for a different location in which to serve, as if this would put them in a better frame of mind. God is using them, he told his Daughters, to further his own designs of salvation. So, "hold yourselves ready to carry out all that he wishes you to do. But make no claims, either to be in this house, or in that parish, or in that country, and do not be afraid to go wherever you may be sent...." And to one of his priests the saint warned, "[God] has no use for our knowledge or our good works if he does not have our heart, and he does not want that heart if we give it to him away from the place where he asks for it."

Ultimately, the heart will out, as it were. Although its action is an inner reality, it cannot remain hidden. The power of charity makes it manifest as a visible sign, as Vincent guaranteed: "A heart filled and animated by [charity] shows forth [God's] inner fire, and everything in a charitable person breathes and preaches charity."

March-April, 1997

"Words So Filled With Spiritual Grace..."

Vincent de Paul's consistently affable manner was a source of admiration to his confreres and to any other contemporaries who dealt with him. It was not always thus. Regarding a contrary temperament that early on plagued him, he confessed: "I addressed myself to God to beg him earnestly to change this curt and forbidding disposition for a meek and benign one. By the grace of our Lord and with some effort on my part to repress the outbursts of passion, I was able to get rid of my black disposition." As his experience taught him, affability was not just a helpful virtue for the missionary, but an occupational necessity, for, as he put it, "By our vocation we must often talk with one another and with our neighbor." That virtue, he said, is "like the soul of good conversation."

Affability engenders mutual respect within a community. It is an equalizer, Vincent claimed, for conditions where there is a diversity of backgrounds, of places of origin, of temperaments and dispositions, and it smooths the path to easier communications. The saint told his confreres, "As charity is the virtue that unites us as members of the one body, affability...perfects that union." The tone of conversation demands a delicate balance. It would take only a soft word to convert a hardened sinner, whereas harshness could cause suffering. Contentiousness should be avoided as self-defeating: often argument is designed to gain the upper hand and thus close the door to agreement. Affability, on the other hand, would keep that door open. Flattery, too, is "unworthy of a Christian." Especially should the missionary be careful in dealing with the poor country people. Otherwise, Vincent noted, "they will pull back and fear to deal with us, thinking us too severe or too lordly for them. When they are treated affably and cordially they feel otherwise and are better disposed to profit from the good we seek to do for them."

It becomes evident that the demands of affability draw upon many more virtues than this single one. Like so many tributaries, virtues such as meekness and humility, kindness and charity, patience and forbearance feed into the mainstream to determine each nuance that affability demands. Examples abound of the saint's adaptability to

these modes. At Saint-Lazare, Vincent had the practice, almost a ritual, of meeting with missionaries to encourage and instruct them as they departed on assignments or to welcome them upon their return. One priest described his own meeting as a "cordial reception...[that] overwhelmed me," and recalled that Vincent's words "were so filled with spiritual grace, so gracious and yet so efficacious that they accomplished what he had in mind." Vincent was sensitive about inquiring about a confrere's health and frame of mind before making a difficult assignment, but he looked for a positive response nevertheless. As he wrote to one confrere: "I am writing to ask you about your health, and what you think of a proposal I have in mind for you...I would ask you, Monsieur, to pray to God, to listen to what he has to say to you about this. Please write me soon about your health and your attitude toward accepting this assignment...."

In other areas less pleasant, he could show himself firm but diplomatic in his affability. Abelly told the story of how Vincent once dealt with a layman who looked to borrow some money. Vincent explained how the Company did not have money for this purpose. The saint "spoke with such gentleness and prudence," and with such benign effect, that the man "left in peace...," giving the reader a sense that this exit was the equivalent of finding oneself out the front door without realizing how you got there. There were times when Vincent had the unpleasant duty of declining a permission requested by a confrere, but he hoped that the petitioner would surmise the refusal. In order to avoid giving pain, Vincent would say "Would you be so good as to remind me of this some other time?" Yet another missionary testified that "I never had the honor of meeting with him that I did not leave with perfect satisfaction, whether he had granted what I asked or had to refuse."

The virtue of affability was a regular theme that Vincent addressed to the community at Saint-Lazare. It is a part of the larger virtue of meekness, he claimed, "to have a great affability, cordiality, and serenity of expression for everyone we meet so as to be agreeable to them. Those who have a smiling and agreeable countenance please everyone. God gave them this grace, by which they seem to offer their hearts and invite others to open theirs...A missionary must strive to be affable and so cordial and simple that he puts everyone he meets at ease...." In time, the saint was able to experience the effectiveness of his words and his example taking root. He passed on to the confreres, as a compliment on their behavior, the remark by a visitor to Saint-Lazare: "I was consoled just three or four days ago at the sight of someone leaving here. He was all smiles, and said to me, 'I noticed here a gentleness, an openness of heart, and a certain charming simplicity (these were his words) which touched me deeply.'" This perception confirmed in Vincent the belief that a large part of the "successes" of the Mission from the beginning could be attributed to this sensitivity: "If God has blessed our first missions we may say that it is because we have acted amiably, humbly, and sincerely toward all sorts of persons."

June, 1997

"Where Are Your Wounds?"

I

A man appeared before Saint Peter, who asked him, "Where are your wounds?" The man replied, "I have no wounds." To which Peter rejoined, "Was there no passion in your life, no cause in which you spent and risked yourself that would invite scars?"

This modern parable speaks the same language as Vincent's discourse on the meaning of zeal. To him zeal is more than simply a show of interest in doing God's work. It is the fire that powers the motors of ministry. It is ardor, excitement, commitment. And yet it is not free-standing. The saint defines zeal as "a pure desire of rendering ourselves pleasing to God and profitable to our neighbor." Consequently it has its origins in love, from which it issues: "Zeal is that which is most pure in the love of God...If the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its rays." Zeal is a virtue seemingly without limits, whose exercise comes at a heavy cost. Vincent welcomed the limitless field for evangelization that the apostolate offered, while chiding those who would set boundaries. "How happy is the missionary," he declared, "who has no limit in this world on where he can go to preach the gospel. Why then do we hesitate and set limits, since God has given us the whole world to satisfy our zeal?"

Vincent was generous in offering advice and encouragement to his confreres about their responses in zeal to the challenges of ministry. But immersed as he was himself in the apostolate, he was aware of his own attitudes and often gave expression to the zeal that drove his ministry. His biographer, Louis Abelly, observed that "Vincent's charity seemed like a burning fire, ever ready to spread when the conditions were right...." He was indeed "consumed by that heavenly fire which Jesus Christ came to bring upon the earth, to respond to everything to do with the glory of God and the salvation of souls."

Vincent's apostolic energy was restless. "True charity does not know how to live in idleness, nor of seeing our brother in need and not to respond." He could not forget that the work of evangelization was endless nor could he shake the guilty feeling that his labors were inadequate: "I remember formerly when I was returning from one of the missions, as I approached the gates of Paris I felt they would fall upon me and crush me. Rarely did I return from a mission but this thought came to me. The reason was, I heard a voice saying within me, 'You have gone out to such and such a village, but others await the same help as you brought them.' Again, I seemed to hear it said, 'If you had not been there, probably many persons would have died in their miserable state....'"

When distance or age cut him out of the action, Vincent still felt the impulse to be a part of the enterprise. To a confrere ready to depart for Madagascar he confided, "There is nothing I desire more upon this earth, if it were permitted, that I might be your companion on this mission." On another occasion, reflecting on the deaths of several missionaries from the plague in Genoa, he drew a lesson on the willingness of the confreres — including himself — for total sacrifice, whether at home or on the missions. "Even as old and decrepit as I am," he confessed, "I should also adopt this attitude, even being ready to go to the Indies to gain souls for God, knowing that I would probably die on the way."

As Vincent sees it, age alone is no excuse for holding back. He therefore refuses to exempt himself from the obligations of the apostolate, whatever his age or other limitations. "If I cannot preach every day," he says, "all right! I will preach twice a week. If I cannot preach more important sermons, I will strive to preach less important ones. And if the people do not hear me, then what is there to prevent me from speaking in a friendly, homely way to those poor folk, as I am now speaking to you [at a Repetition of Prayer], gathering them around me as you are now?"

If Vincent's words were not sufficient testimony to his zeal, his lifelong achievements in the apostolate would certainly be a most convincing witness. Driven by boundless energy and armed with a vision that embraced all manner of projects for the poor, Vincent was to his age a spectacle of charity and zeal in the service of the gospel. That gift had a personal impact, too, on his contemporaries and collaborators. Like the image of the sun whose rays are zeal, Vincent's own zeal radiated others in a way that inspired and energized them.

II

Vincent expected of others the standards of zeal that he demanded of himself. Among these norms was his notion that authentic zeal admitted to no modifications. As a challenge for members entering the Congregation he proposed

that "all who come to the Company [should do so] with the thought of martyrdom, with the desire to suffer death and to consecrate themselves totally to serve God either in a foreign land or here at home...." That is an ideal, of course, but Vincent evidently thinks that it is within reach: "Is anything more reasonable than to give one's life for him who has so freely given his for us?"

This stance holds also for those already at work in the Company. Once, reflecting on what the confreres in Genoa were suffering while serving the plague-stricken, the saint reminded those at home that they must have "a similar disposition and the same desire to suffer for God and for the neighbor and to pour out our lives for this. Yes...we must be committed to God without reserve, to him and to the service of or neighbor. We must strip ourselves of everything for their benefit, giving our very lives for their benefit, always prepared to give all and suffer for the sake of charity...."

Faith is another necessary virtue. It will sustain any confidence for the Congregation to meet the uncertainties of the future. Vincent cites for confirmation the confreres' determination in the early days. "If the Company at its birth and in its cradle had the courage to seize the opportunities to serve God...," he asked, "should we not trust that it will be fortified and grow in time? ...We still feel the effects of the first graces of our vocation poured out upon us." Indeed, a great fear to heed is that "by our laxity we will become unworthy of the blessings God has so abundantly given the Company until now...."

The underside of zeal for Vincent was lukewarmness. In dealing with faint-hearted confreres, who surrendered to discouragement about the future works of the Congregation and who tainted others with the same depression, he could only wonder what damage "these cowardly souls" do in the Congregation. Gone to extremes, this attitude of men who live in Saint-Lazare could cause "the priests of the Mission who once gave life to the dead [to have] but the name and appearance of what they once were. They will be but corpses...the cadaver of Lazarus, not the resurrected Lazarus, and still less men who bring life to the dead." In rebuking this mentality, he appeals to the members' self-respect: "O Gentlemen, if you had but a spark of that sacred fire which consumed the heart of Jesus Christ could you spend your life with folded arms and abandon those who call for your help?"

Similarly, lukewarmness sometimes breeds laziness. Although Vincent feared excesses, he accepted it at times, on the score that something, even though more, is better than nothing. To a superior who had in his charge some discontented and lazy missionaries, he conceded, "I admit that virtue has two closely associated vices, defect and excess. Of the two, excess is more praiseworthy than defect and should be encouraged."

Although Vincent decried the limits that people put on their zeal, he recognized the need for prudence to moderate the unhealthy effects of its excesses —

"indiscreet zeal," he called it. Such excesses are counterproductive, as Vincent once warned the Ladies of Charity: "By attempting too much [other confraternities] have succumbed under the burden...It could happen that a whole company could fail, if it attempts too much...We seek virtue by doing more. But virtue is not found simply in doing more."

To a missionary (Philip Le Vacher) sent to Barbary, Vincent defined the limits of the confrere's mandate there: "You were sent to Algiers to console afflicted souls, to encourage them in their sufferings, and to help them in persevering in our holy religion...." Regarding the proper stance toward the Moslems and renegade Christians who made up the society, the saint was realistic: "You are not responsible for their salvation, as you may think...Above all, you must not attempt to reform things long established among them, even if they are evil."

Vincent's legacy of zeal is a rich one. The quality of his own zeal, and that which he inspired in his followers, reassured him about the ongoing work of the Mission. In speaking about zeal the saint frequently used images of sparks and flames, that burned within and that flashed outward, as signs of the love of God and zeal — they went together — that drove his ministry. To work within those intense flames is easily to be scarred.

Thus the virtue of zeal, with its attendant costs, was an integral part of Vincent's life, whose course his biographer Louis Abelly fancifully traced thus: "He accomplished and suffered so much during his life until he was finally consumed in the flames of his own zeal." An insight that enlarges on this consuming vision, and serves as a fitting summary of his zeal, comes from the story that, while not "factual," is "true" and has passed into the body of Vincentian mythology. Its source is the film, *Monsieur Vincent.* In the final scene the saint is seated, weary and in pain, on a bench opposite the queen of France, telling her that he has done little or nothing with his life. The queen is incredulous: "If you have done nothing, what about us?" He replies, "I don't know — I only know that I have done nothing." The queen asks sympathetically, "What would you have had to do in order to have accomplished something?" After a silence, Vincent's head lifts and he says with animation, "More!"

December, 1993-January, 1994

Vincent Meditates on Loving the Poor

If only love were epidemic as the plague!
To spread, insinuate itself along the current of the blood and take possession of the heart.

Lord, your prophecy is daily true: the poor are still among us.
The settings of their anguish change with time; the story is the same.
Indeed I worry more for them than for the Company.
In crisis we can surely improvise, but who will hear their call?
Would that love were coextensive with their plight!

But I must not delude myself with self-indulgence, empty words.
Compassion felt from custom, service minus love, are feelings soon dried up.
Nor will rhetoric, though angel-eloquent, fill the need, if I stop short of action.
It is to give a stone when asked for bread, a serpent-substitute for fish.

Not even bread and fish themselves are equal to a hungry heart.
I must see you in my neighbor's need and feel it as your Body's throbbing hurt;
Show the love that consecrates a cup of water given in your name.
With eggs and soup must come a bellyful of hope as well.

And I must be prepared to take some hurt myself:
To summon smiles before ingratitude and impudence
humility to call the poor my lords and masters;
composure in the face of sores and squalor.
But let me not recoil: your very life has touched the poor, for you yourself were one of them.

In doubt about your love for me I only need reflect: you love the poor,
and therefore anyone who loves them is your friend.
Then let them be my entree into your love.
Although the task is hard, my prayer is simple:
Grant me a gentleness receptive to the poor man's miseries,
but muscle equal to loving you, in them, with strength of arms and sweat of brow.

November, 1996